



December, 2009

# Trail Talk

Mission Trails Regional Park Trail Guide Program

Trail Talk Volume 13, Issue 12

## The Voice of the Voice of the Chaparral Story by Millie Basden, photos by Wendy Esterly, Trail Guides

**T**he wren-tit, with its iconic song, is known to all of us as the “voice of the chaparral.” The iconic song is the voice of the male, and is likened to the sound of a bouncing ping pong ball. The female sings a shorter version of the song without the trill at the end. A dueting pair of wren-tits is a distinctive pleasure of the California landscape. Wren-tits sing throughout the year, but most frequently at the beginning of the breeding season and least frequently in November and December. Wren-tits use a burring call note as they forage to maintain contact with one another.

Much of what is known about wren-tits is attributed to research conducted in the 1930s by Mary Marilla Erickson while a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. As I read the report of her field studies, I began to think of Mary as the voice of the wren-tit.

Mary chose to study wren-tits because they were (and are) known to be one of the most sedentary of birds. A wren-tit is likely to spend its entire life within 400 meters of its birthplace. Wren-tits form life-long monogamous pair bonds. Once the pair forms and establishes a territory, they stick with it and each other for life. Others had studied and reported on migratory species, but Mary wanted to give the “plain tale” of a resident species. Here are some of the things Mary has told us about the life of a wren-tit:

**Territory:** “[B]y the first of March the average wren-tit of either sex approaching one year of age is established on an estate of about eight-tenths of an acre



in touch with each other.” Although the territory is maintained throughout the year, wren-tits are less strict about observing the boundaries after the breeding season ends. Young birds without established territories often wander unchallenged into other wren-tits’ territories and hungry adults may forage beyond the boundaries of their established territories.

**Diet:** “The wren-tit lives primarily on insects, spiders and small fruits.” Mary observed wren-tits eating elderberries, snowberries, thimbleberries, poison oak berries and many small insects.

**Nest-building:** “The nest is begun by stretching a cobweb network between the twigs that are to support it....As the work progresses, the ring is crossed by a number of diagonal strands until the network is saucer-



of chaparral, which it shares with its mate....[T]he energies of the two are harmonized and directed toward the defense of their estate and toward keeping

shaped. Then coarse bark fibers are introduced, sparingly at first, until the platform is from half an inch to an inch and a

*(Continued on page 2)*

### In this Issue...

- Voice of Chaparral— Page 1
- Coyote Hunting—Page 3
- Name the Life Form!—Page 3

### Writers wanted...

- Have an interesting story or photo you’d like to share with other Trail Guides? Send them to ‘Trail Talk’ editor Millie Basden at [trailtalkeditor@yahoo.com](mailto:trailtalkeditor@yahoo.com). Please include “Trail Talk” in the subject line!

### Speakers Needed...

- Have you heard an interesting speaker or know an interesting topic that would be appropriate for one of our monthly meetings? If so, please send your ideas to Brian or Ondina Moehl.



Next Trail Guide  
Monthly Meeting:

Wednesday,

January 13

6:30 pm—

(NO December  
Meeting!)

## Monthly Meeting Minutes—November 11, 2009

There were 28 Trail Guides, 4 guests, and Ranger Heidi in attendance.

Fred's number for November was 41. The answer in the form of a question is "How many plant species are represented on the native plant walk at the Visitor Center?" Fred's other numbers were 100–1000 years. The answer in the form of a question is "How long does it take a golf ball to decompose?" He said the on-line article these numbers came from ([www.cnn.com/2009/SPORT/11/04/littering.golf.balls/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2009/SPORT/11/04/littering.golf.balls/index.html)) indicated there are an estimated 300 million golf balls lost or thrown away in the United States every year.

Fred reminded Trail Guides to sign up for walks and record the number of visitors and some interesting observations from the walk, including how visitors learned about the walk.

Fred announced the prize winners for the best walk write-up in October: Arleen Hitchcock and Jo Ann Ellen for their Visitor Center walk on October 24.

Ranger Heidi reported that there were 18 confirmed students for the next Trail Guide class. She still has 20 on the interest list yet to hear from.

Fred announced that plans were being made for 2010 Mission Trails Day on May 15.

Millie Basden, the *Trail Talk* editor, encouraged everyone to submit articles to

her at [trailtalkeditor@yahoo.com](mailto:trailtalkeditor@yahoo.com) and Tom Walters.



Historic Dates for MTRP. George Varga gave an informative talk on the history of the Camp Elliott. Until 1940 the area had been called Camp Holcomb and was a part of Camp Kearny, an Army base dating back to WWI. It was used by the Marines for training. On June 14, 1940, the area was formally designated Camp Elliott. In 1961 about 15,000 acres of Camp Elliott were declared surplus; a portion of this land was obtained by the City of San Diego and incorporated into Mission Trails.

Historic Dates for MTRP. Pam Weinisch gave an interesting talk on John

Harbison, the "King of the Beekeepers."

In 1874 he moved with his family to San Diego County to what is now known as Harbison Canyon. He became the leading producer of honey in the world, in part due to the popular honey created from black and white sages, both found in Mission Trails.

Greg Rubin gave an informative and interesting presentation titled "Native Landscape Myths and Legends."

Upcoming Events:

Bird Walk Saturday, December 19, 8:00–10:00 a.m. at Lake Murray. Meet in the parking lot off Kiowa Dr.

Star Party hosted by George Varga, Saturday, December 19, 5:00–8:00 p.m. Meet at the Kumeyaay Lake Campground day use parking area.

Trail Guide Training starts with Orientation, Saturday, January 9, 2010, 8:30–11:30 a.m. in Visitor Center classrooms. Anyone interested should contact Ranger Heidi.

The next meeting is January 13, 6:30 p.m. in the Visitor Center LIBRARY. After a short business meeting, the program will be a presentation by Rick Halsey on MTRP Ecology and Habitats as part of Trail Guide training.

Respectfully submitted,

Linda L. Kramer, Secretary

## Voice of the Chaparral

(Continued from page 1)

half thick and about four inches in diameter. As soon as it has enough body, the birds perch or sit on it while working. After the platform is well advanced, finer bark strips are brought and placed on the outer rim so that the saucer-like platform is gradually transformed into a deep cup....When the cup is of the requisite depth, cobwebs are stretched over and woven into the rim until it becomes smooth and firm. Finally, a lining of fine round fibers is inserted." Sometimes the nest is "decorated" with small bits of lichen. The nest is usually a couple of feet off the ground in shrubs such as sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), chaparral broom (*Baccharis pilularis*), poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*), or monkey-flower (*Mimulus aurantiacus*).

Roosting: "The individuals of a pair roost side by side, facing in the same directions and so near together that they appear as a

single ball of feathers from which tails, wings, and feet protrude—an appearance that is not accidental or occasional, but is



produced by fluffing, spreading, and interlacing of body feathers to such a degree that when the heads are turned to the outside and buried, a single ball remains without so much as a line of separation. This arrange-

ment of the feathers is an active process involving both movements of the feathers by the muscles that control them and manipulation of them with the bill....[T]he inner leg of each bird is drawn into the feather mass, and the weight supported on the outside leg. The angle of the outside leg to the body suggests that the two birds are braced against each other." Don't you wish you could see this? Mary observed it in birds that were in captivity, but she was convinced that the same behavior occurred in the wild.

Life-expectancy: "[A wren-tit's annual life cycle] may be repeated as many as ten times, but the survival of five cycles is the average success of the wren-tit." When you next hear a wren-tit in MTRP, consider that the bird you are hearing will sing its song for 5, or maybe up to 10 years, and then it will be no more.

When Mary earned her Ph.D. in 1935, about 10% of the doctorates awarded each year in

(Continued on page 3)



## Good Coyote Hunting! By Eillim Nedsab, Photos by Wendy Esterly, Trail Guides



It was a beautiful fall day in Mission Trails Regional Park and Wendy Esterly was out walking the grassland trails with her camera, looking for action. And she found it! A siren wailed in the distance, setting off barking. Out of the grass popped a coyote. Oblivious hikers passed by on the trail nearby. As Wendy snapped photos, the coyote leapt straight up and pounced on something, just like on the National Geographic channel. You never know what you are walking by out there, but it sure pays to look and see what you can see!

## Voice of the Chaparral

(Continued from page 2)

science went to women. After completing her graduate degree, she served as a professor of biological sciences at UC Santa Barbara from 1939 until her death in 1983. Mary was an extraordinary woman who gave a voice to the voice of the chaparral.

Citations:

Erickson, Mary M. "Territory, Annual Cycle, and Numbers in a Population of Wren-tits (*Chamaea fasciata*)" *Univ. of Calif. Publications in Zoology* 42 (1938): 247-334.

Geupel, Geoffrey R. and Grant Ballard. "Wrentit (*Chamaea fasciata*).". *The Birds of North America Online* (A. Poole, Ed.) Ithaca: Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology; 9/5/2009 <<http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/654>>.

Rossiter, Margaret W. *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. 1982. pp 131-132.

## Name That Life Form!

by Millie Basden; photos by Peter Thomas, Trail Guides



Can you name  
this life form  
seen in MTRP?  
(Answer on  
Page 4)

## What's Happening at the Park

### Friday, December 11...

**Stars at Mission Trails**—Join members of the San Diego Astronomy Association from sunset to 10 p.m. at the Kumeyaay Lake Campground's Day Use Parking Lot. Telescopes available (weather permitting.)

### Saturday, December 12...

**Canoyneer Walk**—Join Naturalists from the San Diego History Museum Canoyneers for a hike at Lake Murray. Meet at 1 p.m. near the parking lot at Kiowa Dr.

### Saturday, December 19...

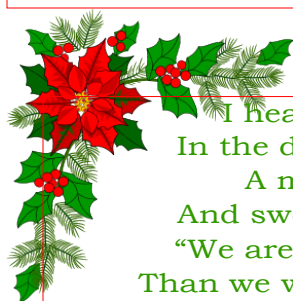
**Guided Bird Walk**—Join resident birder and Trail Guide Jeanne Raimond for an adventure in bird watching! This month: Lake Murray (East Side). Meet in the parking lot off Kiowa Drive. 8 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.

**Star Party**—Join resident stargazer and Trail Guide George Varga to view the night time sky. A thin crescent Moon and Jupiter will be over the Fortuna Mountains as the star party begins. Meet at the far end of the Kumeyaay Lake Campground Day Use Parking Lot. 5-8 p.m. (weather permitting.)

## Name That Life Form (answer from page 3)



The prickly glochids and spines arising from an areole on the edible fruit or "tuna" of a prickly pear cactus. Coast Prickly Pear (*Opuntia littoralis*) is the most common in southern California, but other species of *Opuntia* hybridize with *O. littoralis* making positive identification tricky even for the expert. The tuna may be eaten fresh (typically after removing the prickly rind) or the juice extracted to make a drink, jelly, or syrup. California thrashers and greater roadrunners are also known to eat tunas.



I heard a bird sing  
In the dark of December  
A magical thing  
And sweet to remember.  
"We are nearer to Spring  
Than we were in September,"  
I heard a bird sing  
In the dark of December.

~ Oliver Herford, *I Heard a Bird Sing*



If you can't do a walk  
you signed-up for, ar-  
range for someone to  
take your place or let  
Fred or Ranger Heidi  
know you won't be  
there.

### Mission Trails Regional Park Trail Guide Program

President—Fred Kramer  
VP (Programs)—Brian & Ondina Moehl  
Secretary—Linda Kramer  
Publicity Chair—Chris Axtmann  
Ranger Liaison—Heidi Gutknecht  
Training Program Director—Bill Howell  
Trail Talk Editor—Millie Basden  
Trail Talk Production—Tom Walters  
Trail Talk Distribution—Ed Bailey  
Trail Talk Photographer—Wendy Esterly

The Trail Guide Program is dedicated to provide the visiting public with education and understanding of the unique environmental and historical attributes of Mission Trails Regional Park. The Trail Guides supplement the Park Rangers in outreach programs to the public.  
Contact Information:

MTRP Visitor Center—619-668-3281

Ranger Heidi Gutknecht—619-668-3279

Fred Kramer—fred.kramer@cox.net

Millie Basden—trailtalkeditor@yahoo.com

Tom Walters—twalters@ucsd.edu

Brian Moehl—bmoehl@att.net

Ondina Moehl—olsummers@hotmail.com

